

THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGES THAT AFFECTED  
THE MUSIC OF MOTOWN RECORDS  
FROM 1959-1972

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The Social and Cultural Changes that Affected the Music of Motown Records  
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by  
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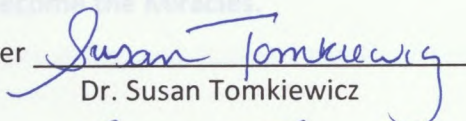


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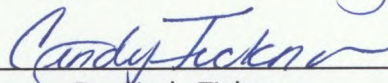


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Motown Records produced many of the greatest musicians from the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, songs like "Dancing in the Street" and "What's Going On?" targeted social issues in America and created a voice for African-American people through their messages. Events like the Mississippi Freedom Summer and Bloody Thursday inspired the artists at Motown to create these songs. Influenced by the cultural and social circumstances of the Civil Rights Movement, the musical output of Motown Records between 1959 and 1972 evolved from a sole focus on entertainment in popular culture to a focus on motivating social change through music.

In 1959, Berry Gordy Jr. founded Motown Records at 2648 West Grand Boulevard in Detroit with an \$800 loan from his family. Before this time Gordy worked at the Ford automobile plant. From his experience at the plant, he decided to model his record label after the Ford automobile assembly line. He wanted to apply the concept that each person had his or her own part and the individual parts added to the production as a whole. Gordy began his musical career as a songwriter and wrote "Lonely Teardrops," a song sung by Jackie Wilson, and Motown's first hit record. He decided that to make a substantial profit, he had to own the publishing and produce the records. With this addition of publishing to the label, he was able to sign more artists like the Matadors, who later become the Miracles.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 15-30.



In the early days of Motown starting in 1959, the sound of the music had influences from gospel, blues, jazz and R&B. Some of the musical influences include a standard blues progression that has tonic to subdominant motion, and then resolves back to tonic, (I-IV-I). This progression of chords was popularized by early Classic blues singers. It also included a more edgy style of singing. The blues progression and style of singing can be heard in an early Motown song called "Money (That's What I Want)" by Barrett Strong.

Most musicians and scholars cannot describe the sound with just one musical term because it is truly a mixture of different musical elements. In an interview, Berry Gordy was asked to describe the sound. He said, "Motown's sound was a combination of "rats, roaches, soul, guts, and love."<sup>2</sup> The musicians often got their musical knowledge and skill from their environment. Historian Suzanne E. Smith describes the making of the sound in the following quote. "A riff at a late night jam session, choir practice in a high school music class, vocalizing in the echoes of a concrete stairwell or under a corner street light—all of these experiences, typical urban life, created the Motown sound."<sup>3</sup>

The Funk Brothers recorded most of the instrumental accompaniment for the Motown songs. The members of the Funk Brothers were Earl Van Dyke, piano and bandleader; James Jamerson, bass guitar and double bass; Paul Riser and George

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<sup>2</sup> Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1999, 155.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 161.



Bohanon, trombone; Henry Cosby, saxophone; William "Papa Zita" Benjamin and Richard "Pistol" Allen, drums; Robert White, Eddie Willis, and Joe Messina, guitar; and Jack Ashford, Jack Brokensha, and Eddie Brown, percussion. With this large group of musicians, they were able to use different techniques to create a unique sound.

According to historian David Morse, "Motown music of 1963-4 was characterized by a gospel beat, in which the snare drum, prominently recorded, accented every beat and was reinforced by tambourines and hand-clapping."<sup>4</sup>

Most of the members of the Funk Brothers were interested in playing jazz. They went to a club nearby called *Chit Chat* in Detroit and would have jam sessions to try out new musical ideas, such as chord changes, riffs, and melodies that would later be used in Motown songs. Earl Van Dyke said, "It [Motown] was just a gig to us. All we wanted to do was play jazz, but we all had families, and at the time playing rhythm and blues was the best way to pay the rent." With their interests in jazz, they incorporated those musical ideas from jazz into the Motown sound. The following quote from Suzanne E. Smith describes why and how they incorporated these ideas.

The Funk Brothers also appropriated and combined jazz melodies to invigorate the phrasing or transitions of a Motown song. Trombonist George Bohanon and keyboardist Earl Van Dyke inserted the melodies of "Canadian Sunset" and "Begin the Beguine" into the opening chord changes of Mary Wells's song "My Guy" which added to the record's winsome charm. The jazz improvisation sometimes emerged out of necessity and desire to end the workday.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> David Morse, *Motown and The Arrival of Black Music* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1971), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, 160-161.



With the integration of these new ideas into popular music, James Jamerson transformed the bass lines. He changed from the standard root motion bass lines and incorporated chromatic passing tones and syncopated eighth-note motives. His bass lines were similar to the bass lines of jazz bassist, Ray Brown. These musical techniques had not been used in popular music before.<sup>6</sup>

Another contribution to the new sound was how they recorded it and where it was recorded. Studio A, or as the Motown musicians called it "the Snakepit," was in Detroit at Hitsville U.S.A, Motown's original headquarters. This is the place where many Motown songs were recorded. The space was small with wooden floors and had a built-in isolation booth for the singers. Technical problems often arose because of how small the space was. Many sounds from different instruments would bleed into more than one microphone, causing some sounds to be more prominent than others. Many musicians decided not to use amplifiers because of this problem. The decision to not use amplifiers gave the music a live, acoustic sound. Also, the heating and air conditioning caused too much extraneous noise, so they would turn them on and off. As a result of the varying temperatures, the instruments would not stay tuned properly.<sup>7</sup> Although many of these factors caused problems, they all contributed to the unique sound.

In this small studio, they recorded the music in a specific way. There might have been twelve musicians on any track and they would layer them to create a fuller sound.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, 156.



If there were three guitarists and three pianists, the musicians would split into different ranges low, middle, and high. This would create a fuller, more dynamic sound because they used the full range of all the instruments. They often recorded small parts that would later be put together. Earl Van Dyke said, "Sometimes we got called into the studio just to cut rhythm tracks for songs that hadn't even been written yet—no melody, nothin'."<sup>8</sup> The melody for many songs came from these instrumental tracks. Berry Gordy Jr. and his other writers and producers would write songs with no particular artist in mind and then listen to the resulting tracks and write the lyrics based on these tracks. They created the song and decided whose voice was best for the song. All of these different elements combined created the Motown sound, but certain elements in performance and music changed so that Motown could broaden its audiences.

During this time, African-Americans and whites functioned as separate cultures. They lived in different neighborhoods and sent their kids to different schools; the music to which they listened was broadcasted on different stations; their family and social lives were separate, and they had different outlooks on life. However, life was beginning to change for Americans. The *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case had just ruled that public schools that were segregated were unequal. This ruling would change the South's way of life because until this ruling schools were segregated and many Southern white people were content with that. Integration would become one of the hardest obstacles to address, especially in the South. This ruling was the beginning of many

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 119.



cases and events that would challenge segregation. Even with the new integration reform, the social lives of African-Americans and whites were still separate. Berry Gordy Jr. did not necessarily want to change this, but he wanted everyone to listen to the music of Motown. He did not want the success of the music to be stifled by racial tensions in America.

Gordy wanted Motown's African-American artists to transcend racial boundaries, so they changed how the artists looked and how they carried themselves on stage. Motown dressed their artists in matching elegant dresses and suits instead of regular, everyday clothes. They felt that this would elevate the music because people would want to emulate their artists which means that they would have to watch their performances and listen to their music, thus helping them to expand their audiences. If their audiences aspired to be like the artists, they would continue to support the music. Berry Gordy Jr. hired Cholly Atkins to be the Motown choreographer. Atkins choreographed crisp, clean dance moves for groups like The Temptations and The Supremes. This allowed the artists to look refined and almost perfect. African-American and white audiences were captivated by this new appeal that the artists had. As a result of these changes, Motown was able to cross racial boundaries. Once they began to crossover, artists were able to perform at The Copacabana, a club that African-Americans could not perform in before Motown was able to cross over to white audiences. Motown Records helped to provide opportunities to African-Americans at a time when race relations was one of the biggest problems America was facing. As a



result, African-American people became more empowered over time and this empowerment would surface in the music and in society.

Although Motown was successfully crossing over to white audiences with their music, they were experimenting with the idea of a label that would be dedicated to the preservation of African-American thoughts and ideals. This label was created by Berry Gordy and called *Black Forum*. The first speech that Motown recorded was *The Great March to Freedom*, a speech given by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963. Langston Hughes and other African-American poets also recorded an album of poetry entitled *Poets of the Revolution*. These recordings aimed to present African-American struggles to the world in hopes that society would change.<sup>9</sup> Based on the political events of this time, American society was changing and those changes would influence the music.

The Cold War, the Korean War, and the Interstate Highway Act impacted American lives and Americans wanted better lives for themselves. As a result there was an expansion in the middle class. People could afford to buy new items like cars and televisions because banks began lending money to middle, working class families. The suburbs became more appealing because Americans had more money, and houses were now affordable causing people to migrate from the city to the suburbs. Other technology that was blossoming was the advertisement business. Advertising for cars, music, and household items became more creative through the use of television and radio commercials as well as flyers. The invention of the transistor car radio was

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<sup>9</sup> Smith, 17.



something on which Motown capitalized. The first transistor car radio was invented in 1955 and became increasingly more popular in the late 1950s as cars became more popular. Car radios were now more affordable, so more people had them. Many of Motown's early songs were built for the car radio audience. The car radio audience included middle class families who lived in the suburbs, but, more importantly, their teenagers who would want to borrow their parents' cars. Some of the first critics of the car radio said, "Motown's light, unfussy, evenly stressed beat, its continuous loop melodies, [are] the ideal accompaniment for driving."<sup>10</sup> In the recording studio at Motown Records, they tested their music on car radio speakers to make sure that the people that were riding in the car could hear everything clearly.

Another notable invention was the vinyl record. With the invention of records, most radio stations went from playing live performances to playing records. With this change, there was less room for improvisation because the songs could only be two minutes long. When interviewed, Smokey Robinson said, "I've just geared myself to radio time. The shorter the record is nowadays, the more it's gonna be played. This is a key thing in radio time. . . . If you have a record that's 2:15 long it's definitely gonna get more play than one that's 3:15, at first, which is very important." These shorter songs such as "Please Mr. Postman" and "My Guy", aided Motown in its goal of crossing over to white audiences. When asked in an interview, Bobby Rogers, one of the Miracles, said that Motown would print false lengths of time on the record so that radio stations

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, 123.



would play the music. At this time, white radio stations considered African-American music race-music.<sup>11</sup> This caused African-American music to not be played as often as other music, or only be played as a lead-in for commercials.<sup>12</sup> With these events and inventions, Motown was given a platform to flourish.

From 1960 to early 1964, Motown had many artists gaining international recognition like The Marvelettes, Mary Wells, The Miracles, and the Funk brothers. During this time in Motown's history, the music was solely intended for entertainment. William "Smokey" Robinson and Berry Gordy were producing and writing most of the songs. Many of the songs were about innocent love and relationships. The songs were perceived as innocent because of a specific combination of musical and non-musical elements used by Motown, such as simple, sweet sounding, major harmonies and the appeal to teenagers through the use of young artists.

A song that captures this innocence is "Please Mr. Postman" (1961). The song was sung by The Marvelettes. The Marvelettes were young teenage girls singing about love and because of their youth, it aided them in being perceived as innocent. "Please Mr. Postman" was written by Georgia Dobbins, a member of the group, and Brian Holland, a new producer at Motown. The Funk Brothers did the accompaniment and Marvin Gaye played drums. The song is about a girl waiting for a letter from her boyfriend who has been gone a long time. Musically, there is rhythmic emphasis on

<sup>11</sup> Race-music is what people called African-American music, such as jazz, gospel, blues, during the early 1900s as a means of classification.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 124.



every beat, but the overall groove is felt on beats 2 and 4. They achieve the overall groove by adding hand-clapping on beats 2 and 4. The later songs of Motown, recorded during 1960-1964, contrast in that they emphasize every beat evenly, and the groove is not felt as heavily on beats 2 and 4. This made the music livelier and more danceable. Motown did this in attempts to crossover. They achieved this by mixing African-American traditions with popular music of the day.

Gladys Horton, lead singer of the Marvelettes at that time, had a gritty, raspy sounding voice. She sang small riffs which hinted at an influence from gospel and blues music. This contrasted with the sweet, gentle background vocals. The style of having sweet background vocals with close, parallel harmonies was important because it was a style of singing that was made popular in a preceding musical genre, Doo-Wop. During the 1950s and 1960s, there was a rise in girl groups in Doo-Wop and because of the popularity this style of singing it carried through to the early music of Motown.

"Please Mr. Postman" is not a harmonically complex song; the same chords are repeated throughout in the same order. The progression is tonic-submediant-predominant-dominant-tonic (I-vi-IV-V-I) and was common in popular music at the time. The progression is simple and predictable because it is based on Western music and how composers constructed phrase harmonies. The lyrics are simple and there are no underlying meanings. The lyrics below show the innocence and the simple nature of a song from this time period.



Oh yes, wait a minute, Mr. Postman  
Wait, Mr. Postman

There must be some word today  
From my boyfriend who's so far away  
Please, Mr. Postman, look and see  
Is there a letter, a letter for me?

I was standing here waiting, Mr. Postman  
So, so patiently  
For just a card, for just a letter  
Saying he's returning home to me<sup>13</sup>

An example to show the change from "Please Mr. Postman" is a later song "My Guy," (1964) sung by Mary Wells. It was written and produced by William "Smokey" Robinson. The song is about how a young girl will never leave her lover no matter who or what comes along. Earl Van Dyke and George Bohanon inserted the melodies from "Canadian Sunset" and "Begin the Beguine" into the introduction of the song. In an interview Van Dyke said that the producers did not really know much about jazz, so they probably would not have noticed the use of those melodies. He also said that he thought that the song would end up in the trash, so he just used those melodies to get through a long day of recording.<sup>14</sup>

Mary Wells sang this song in a smooth singing style. The background vocals are still sweet sounding. Underneath the vocals are legato brass chords with small interjections throughout. The music does not have much influence from gospel or blues

<sup>13</sup>The Marvelettes, Brianbert, Please Mr. Postman, Lyrics, Tamla, T 54046, 1961.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, 160-161.



music. The lyrics are simple like many songs of this time. The lyrics below show the innocent love and the simplicity of the lyrics.

Nothing you can say can tear me away  
From my guy  
Nothing you could do, 'cause I'm stuck like glue  
To my guy

I'm sticking to my guy like a stamp to a letter  
Like birds of a feather we stick together  
I'm tellin' you from the start  
I can't be torn apart from my guy

Nothing you could do could make me be untrue  
To my guy  
Nothing you could buy could make me tell a lie  
To my guy<sup>15</sup>

Other songs during this time period were "Shop Around" by The Miracles, and "The Way You Do the Things You Do" by The Temptations. All of these songs are upbeat with lively accompaniments and have simple, memorable melodies. Those characteristics carried Motown's music to the top of the music charts. Even though most of the songs during this time did not have much to do with what was going on socially, artists still dealt with discrimination, especially in the South. They often performed for segregated crowds and still had to enter through the back door of different venues. Motown was beginning to cross racial barriers as musicians, but the artists were still expected to abide by segregation laws.<sup>16</sup> Political events like the Freedom Rides and John

<sup>15</sup>Mary Wells, William "Smokey" Robinson, My Guy, Lyrics, Motown, M 1056, 1964.

<sup>16</sup> "Freedom Rides", *Congress of Racial Equality*, <http://www.core-online.org/History/freedom%20rides.htm>.



F. Kennedy's Civil Rights Address were affecting the lives of African-Americans during this time.

In 1961, the Freedom Rides started. The Freedom Rides happened because the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) decided to test the Supreme Court rulings in the *Irene Morgan vs. Commonwealth of Virginia* (1946) and *Boynton vs. Virginia* (1960) cases. The Supreme Court ruled that the segregation of public buses was unconstitutional. CORE had groups of African-Americans and whites set out to ride buses from Washington D.C. down to New Orleans, Louisiana. To test the law, CORE decided to have one African-American sitting in the front of the bus, have a white and African-American person sitting together, and one African-American would abide by the segregation customs in the South in case they needed to contact CORE. This way they could truly challenge the segregationist ways of the South.<sup>17</sup>

When arriving in Southern cities the Freedom Riders received violence from segregationists. Mobs of segregationists stormed the buses when they arrived in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama. They set the bus on fire and beat the passengers severely. Images of these buses and the passengers on the buses made international news.<sup>18</sup> As a result of these images being broadcasted, President John F. Kennedy decided to address the nation on national television.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



John F. Kennedy's Civil Rights Address in 1963 helped bring the Civil Rights Movement to the forefront. He asked all Americans to treat their fellow Americans with respect no matter their skin color. This address led to the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. The Civil Rights Act outlawed segregation at restaurants, hotels, libraries and public schools. Even though there was resistance to these new laws, it brought about change that was much needed. Moving into late 1964 to 1967, these changes brought new opportunities for the music and artists of Motown. The music began to assume a different role in society as well.<sup>19</sup>

From 1964-1967, the most successful Motown acts were Martha and the Vandellas, The Temptations, The Supremes, and The Four Tops. During this time, Motown had 14 number-one pop songs, 20 number-one soul songs, and 74 top-fifteen soul songs. The music was successful, and the "sound" was what people loved. Historian Mark Kurlansky describes the new sound, "The Motown sound was magical, it was fun, and it was lucrative. It was the sound of men who loved what they were doing, though to this day they still don't agree on just how it was done. All that is certain is that they made great music."<sup>20</sup>

Berry Gordy enlisted new writers, known as Holland-Dozier-Holland—Brian Holland, Eddie Holland, and Lamont Dozier. This trio wrote some of the most memorable Motown songs like "Nowhere to Run" by Martha and the Vandellas and

<sup>19</sup> Mark Kurlansky, *Ready for a Brand New Beat: How "Dancing in the Street" Became the Anthem for a Changing America* (New York: The Penguin Group), 2013, 106-107.

<sup>20</sup> George, 103.



"Where Did Our Love Go?" by The Supremes. They also wrote "I Can't Help Myself (Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch)" and "Baby I Need Your Loving" by The Four Tops.

Although Motown still created songs about love and relationships, some songs began to represent political and social change. "Dancing in the Street" became an anthem for the Civil Rights Movement. It was written by William "Mickey" Stevenson, Ivy Jo Hunter, and Marvin Gaye in 1964 and performed by Martha and the Vandellas. The song was unusual for Motown because it had a brass introduction, and the rhythmic emphasis changed from every beat to only the second and fourth beats. The changes to the rhythmic emphasis are similar to those of the early Motown songs. To help emphasize the second and fourth beats, the musicians used hand clapping and a tambourine. This song also had some influences from the blues. The first significant chord change is from tonic to subdominant to tonic, which is a common progression throughout blues music. The verse to chorus harmony roughly outlines a 16-bar blues, which is an adaptation of the standard 12-bar blues. Martha Reeves sang this song with more blues and gospel influence. She did this by singing the words without perfect clarity and also using scoops and riffs. There was more grit in her voice than in the earlier Motown songs such as "My Guy" by Mary Wells, which was sung in a smooth, legato singing style. These small changes gave the music a more relaxed feel heard in gospel music, and the change in sound proved to be a success; people were moved by this song. Rolland Snellings, writer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, said, "they are moving to the rhythms of a New Song, a New Sound: dancing in the



streets to a Universal Dream that haunts their wretched nights: they dream of freedom!"<sup>21</sup>

Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement used this song as a call to action for people to stand up and challenge racial discrimination. This song can be interpreted many ways. It opens with a call to everyone, everywhere. This is important because the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement wanted people from different races and different backgrounds to join the movement. The lyric "summer's here and the time is right" is important in the interpretation of the song because summer would have been the perfect time to take action because many of the young African-Americans were home from school and younger people were the audience that Motown was targeting. The young adults and teenagers were the face of many protests and riots.

The Civil Rights Movement was also a musical movement and the lyric "All we need is music, sweet music; there'll be music everywhere" is a true statement. There was music everywhere; African-Americans sang spirituals in church, at protests and often played music during rallies. African-American musicians from all genres began creating music inspired by the events of the Civil Rights Movement such as John Coltrane, jazz saxophonist and composer, who wrote a song called "Alabama" in 1963 in response to the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombings that killed four young African-

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, 188.



American girls.<sup>22</sup> The music aided the movement's nonviolent ideals. African-American protestors used music as a way to uplift themselves when they were surrounded by negativity. Dating back to slavery, African-Americans used music as a tool of expression, unification, and communication. Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, music was used for the same purposes. They were expressing their desire for freedom and at protests they were one in song. African-Americans often were separated and they were able to sing and communicate with each other.

The song also names different cities with strong African-American populations that were going through struggles such as Chicago, Detroit, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. Amiri Baraka, African-American writer during the civil rights movement, said that the song was a prognostication of what was to come in terms of rebellion and revolution because of the tense of the song.<sup>23</sup> The song is written in the future tense, which aids the gathering and unifying of people to join the movement and rebel against discrimination.

After this song was released there were major riots in almost all of the cities listed. In 1965, the Watts riots occurred in Los Angeles. Two years later in 1967, there were riots in Detroit and New York and they are considered some of the worst riots in history because of the number of deaths and businesses destroyed. The lyrics below

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<sup>22</sup> Jarvis DeBerry, "Remember Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing with John Coltrane and Martin Luther King," *The Times-Picayune*, last modified September 11, 2013, [http://www.nola.com/opinions/index.ssf/2013/09/remember\\_sixteenth\\_street\\_bapt.html](http://www.nola.com/opinions/index.ssf/2013/09/remember_sixteenth_street_bapt.html)

<sup>23</sup> Smith, 188.



show the call for change, the important cities with African-American populations, and the literal meaning of just dancing.

While Calling out around the world,  
 Are you ready for a brand new beat?  
 Mississippi in Summer's here and the time is right for dancing in the street  
 They're dancing in Chicago  
 Down in New Orleans  
 In New York City  
 "Freedom Summer," Allen was murdered because he was going to testify in court  
 All we need is music, sweet music  
 against a white There'll be music everywhere  
 volunteer, for There'll swinging and swaying and records playing  
 registration among African-Americans. Allen  
 began receiving Oh, it doesn't matter what you wear  
 would not go Just as long as you are there  
 These events So come on, every guy grab a girl  
 Summer Project Everywhere around the world  
 There'll be dancing  
 Dancing in the street<sup>24</sup>

H. Rap Brown, Civil Rights leader, used "Dancing in the Street" during his organized demonstrations. He would often say, "It ain't what's on your head, it's what's in it."<sup>25</sup> One can associate Brown's interpretation with this particular lyric of the song: "Oh it doesn't matter what you wear, just as long as you are there." To the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, they were telling people that it was not about how a person looked but did a person have that drive and willingness to fight for justice. If people

<sup>24</sup> Herb Boyd, *We Shall Overcome*, (Oxford: Journal, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Martha and the Vandellas, Marvin Gaye, Ivy Jo Hunter, William "Mickey" Stevenson, *Dancing in the Street*, Lyrics, Gordy, G 7033, 1964.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, 187.



wanted change, they had to go to the streets and change it; Civil Rights leaders thought that the streets belonged to the people.

While Motown had much success from this song, tensions were building in Mississippi in the summer of 1964. The murder of Louis Allen, an African-American farmer, caused the local African-American leaders to decide to proceed with the "Freedom Summer." Allen was murdered because he was going to testify in court against a white legislator, E. H. Hurst. Allen witnessed Hurst killing Herbert Lee, a volunteer, for trying to improve voters' registration among African-Americans. Allen began receiving threats from local white policemen and other white people and the FBI would not grant him protection. Allen's son, Henry, found him dead in their front yard. These events proved to be the catalyst to move forward with the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project.<sup>26</sup>

Volunteers from all over America went to Mississippi to help African-Americans with voters' registration. This project was organized by the Council of Federated Organizations, which included CORE, SNCC, NAACP, and SCLC.<sup>27, 28</sup> These organizations coached the volunteers in the ways of nonviolence because they had to be prepared for violence, jail and even death. The leaders of these organizations told the volunteers that they should not travel in interracial groups unless they had to and if they were in a car,

<sup>26</sup> Herb Boyd, *We Shall Overcome*, (Illinois: Source), 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Kurlansky, xv-xxi.

<sup>28</sup> Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).



whoever was the minority would lie against the floor of the car. Many of the volunteers were attacked and some even murdered because of their support of the Civil Rights Movement. Even though many African-Americans did not get registered to vote, it brought national awareness to the Jim Crow South by broadcasting the news of murders and images and video footage of violent racial discrimination.<sup>29</sup> Violence became a tool used to combat racial integration.

Despite the chaos surrounding the Freedom Rides, Motown continued to produce hit songs. Many of the songs would continue to have multiple interpretations, including "Nowhere to Run" by Martha and the Vandellas, which was successful by mid-1965. In June of 1965, Motown decided to team up with the Ford Motors Company and CBS in the production of "It's What's Happening, Baby", a show on CBS that featured popular music created to encourage education and summer employment for the youth. The show was sponsored by the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity.

In one episode, Martha and the Vandellas performed "Nowhere to Run" while moving through a Ford Mustang assembly line. The Ford assembly line was the perfect backdrop for a performance of this song because the Funk Brothers used car chains to create a strong rhythmic pulse throughout the song. The song is about a girl who wants to escape from her lover but she keeps seeing him and thinking about him, so she cannot get away. Percussion instruments, such as tambourine, snare drum, and tire chains, are used throughout to emphasize every beat of the song. The driving force of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



the song is a repeated motive. Martha Reeves sang this song in a smooth, legato style. Throughout the song there are some small blues influences. Most of the cadences move from IV-I. The style in which Earl Van Dyke played the piano is reminiscent of blues music. This style contrasted the sleek, effortless singing in the song and it was also different from many of the other Motown songs during this time period.

"Nowhere to Run" became more than a song about a girl and her lover, for some African-Americans working at the Ford automobile plant, it meant that they had "nowhere to run" if they lost their jobs to industrialization.<sup>30</sup> This interpretation can be associated with this particular lyric: "It's not love I'm runnin' from, just the heartbreak I know will come." The use of the tire chains can add another interpretation which is the bondage of people because of race and African-Americans were in bondage literally and psychologically since slavery. During this time it was hard for African-Americans to live with the discrimination and the violence. If they fought back against the violence with passive resistance they could be beaten or killed. Many of them were scared so they had to live in bondage and in fear of their lives. The lyrics below are presented to show the different interpretations; the first is the fear of technological advancement, the second is the literal meaning of not being able to get away from a former lover, and the third is bondage because of racial discrimination.

Nowhere to run to baby, nowhere to hide  
I got nowhere to run to baby, nowhere to hide

<sup>30</sup>Smith, 140.



It's not love I'm runnin' from,  
 Just the heartbreak I know will come  
 Cause I know you're no good for me  
 But you've become a part of me

Everywhere I go, your face I see,  
 Every step I take, you take with me, yeah  
 Nowhere to run to baby, nowhere to hide  
 Got nowhere to run to baby, nowhere to hide<sup>31</sup>

Another song by Martha and the Vandellas, "Heatwave," represented a truth about African-American lives. According to historian Suzanne Smith, for some, this song was "a simple testament to the metaphorical, incendiary power of romance" and for many African-Americans "it reminded them that they [were] burning."<sup>32</sup>

Despite these circumstances, the aforementioned songs were popular, and the practice of Motown teaming up with Ford proved to help Motown continue to crossover to broader audiences. Motown was able to book The Supremes at The Copacabana in 1965. They were the first Motown artist to appear at The Copacabana. The Supremes also appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show 15 times from 1964 to 1967. As Motown was afforded more opportunities, the artists were able to blur racial boundaries. By 1968, Motown was a successful record label and its music started to become a voice for the African-American community. Before 1968, African-American people were changing the meaning of songs from innocent love and giving them political and social meaning, but in 1968 and onward, artists of all genres were writing songs that depicted societal issues and struggles through their lyrics. Times were changing and people were thinking

<sup>31</sup> Martha and the Vandellas, Holland—Dozier—Holland, *Nowhere to Run*, Lyrics, Gordy, G 7039, 1965.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, 127-129.



differently about the struggles of the world. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, African-American scholar and professor, says this about the reasons that music and its societal role was changing in America:

“...the rise of a new black political consciousness, the flames of urban riots and rebellions, the war in Vietnam, the expansion of American protest music, the relentless appropriation of black music by white artists, the evolution of student activism, and the resurgence of progressive politics began to shape the music of some of black America’s bravest artists.”<sup>33</sup>

The societal changes listed above contributed largely to the changing of tone and subject matter of not only Motown’s music but all music. Some genres had already begun linking politics and music. For example, Nina Simone, jazz-folk singer-songwriter, had written a song entitled “Mississippi Goddam” in 1964 and the song is about the struggles of African-Americans in the early 1960s. Motown was one of the last record labels to start producing politically conscious music.

From 1968 to 1972, Motown began their journey into American protest music. The sound of music was changing during this time period. The music started to include more blues and R&B influences than in previous years. Dyson describes this sound as “funk modernism” also known as psychedelic soul. Norman Whitfield was an important songwriter and producer of funk modernism. Some of the musical characteristics associated with funk modernism are heavy use of the wah-wah pedal for the guitarists, varying rhythmic patterns, hyperactive bass lines, and energetic percussive elements.

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<sup>33</sup>Michael Eric Dyson, *Mercy, Mercy Me: The Art, Loves and Demons of Marvin Gaye* (New York: Basic Civitas Books), 2004, 49.



Many of the musical characteristics mentioned above come from jazz and blues sounds and ultimately that is what funk modernism was, a fusion of sounds from earlier genres.<sup>34</sup> As music was changing and progressing, Motown was able to successfully use these sounds to promote social change through music.

Artists like Edwin Starr, The Supremes, Marvin Gaye, and Martha and the Vandellas sang songs specifically for certain historical, social, and political events that were happening, like the Vietnam War and Bloody Thursday. These songs were "War" by Edwin Starr, which is about the Vietnam War; "Love Child" by The Supremes, about unwed teenage mothers; "What's Going On" by Marvin Gaye, also about the Vietnam War and police brutality; and "I Should Be Proud" by Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, which is also about the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam War and military integration reform seemed to coincide with each other and there was unrest amongst African-American soldiers during the Vietnam War because they did not want to come home to the same racial discrimination.<sup>35</sup> The Vietnam War affected the artists at Motown and they were inspired to create songs to express how they were feeling. Marvin Gaye's album, *What's Going On*, was inspired from the circumstances surrounding him such as the Vietnam War, poverty, and crime.

The album, *What's Going On*, was Motown's first album with a concept. All nine of the songs on the album were connected to a social struggle. Gaye also changed the

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<sup>34</sup> Dyson, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Kurlansky, 149-151.



sound of the music. There were many layers to these songs; they were not just vocals and a rhythm section like earlier Motown songs. These songs included string sections, scat sections, and spoken word and each song fades into the next without stops or breaks. He added gospel and jazz influences through the style of singing and the extension of harmonies. According to historian Suzanne Smith, "These musical additions heightened the political impact of Gaye's lyrics. The music created a spiritual atmosphere and stage on which Gaye could portray his drama about poverty, violence, racial discrimination, and social injustice."<sup>36</sup>

This album was inspired not only by what Gaye saw, but also the circumstances of his own family members. His brother had returned home from Vietnam and was unable to find work, so he had to become a doorman at a hotel to make a living. His brother's courage inspired him to write a song for him. "What's Happening, Brother?" is one of the nine songs featured on this album. These issues were so close to home for him, so his music was thickly textured and the lyrics were deeply moving. Historian Nelson George describes how Gaye achieved the sound, "Through overdubbing, Gaye imparted lyric, rhythmic and emotional counterpoint to his material. The result was a swirling stream-of-consciousness that enabled him to protest, show allegiance, love, hate, dismiss, and desire in one proverbial swoop."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Smith, 239.

<sup>37</sup> George, 177.



The song "What's Going On" was written in response to several events that occurred in 1969. One of the writers, Renaldo Benson of the Four Tops, had witnessed, what is now known as "Bloody Thursday." On May 15, 1969, a demonstration occurred in People's Park in Berkeley, California. Governor Ronald Reagan sent police and highway patrols into break up the demonstration. Because the protesters decided to stay, the demonstration turned violent. Over 3,000 protesters and the police had a violent confrontation. Many were injured and the police killed one bystander. After witnessing this, Benson was talking with Al Cleveland, a co-writer of the song, about the events that had happened, and they were asking themselves, "what's going on?" With "Bloody Thursday" and the Vietnam War taking place people were trying to figure out what was happening, people were getting hurt and dying all of the time. He uses these events as a basis for the lyrics.<sup>38</sup> Gaye says that the mothers are crying because their sons are dying at war. He sings this in the opening of the song:

Mother, mother  
There's too many of you crying  
Brother, brother, brother  
There's far too many of you dying<sup>39</sup>

During this time people were picketing and marching to try and change things. At these demonstrations the protesters encountered violence from police and other law enforcement agencies. Gaye mentions these events in the lyric:

<sup>38</sup> George, 176-177.

<sup>39</sup> Marvin Gaye, Al Cleveland, Renaldo Benson, and Marvin Gaye, *What's Going On*, Lyrics, Tamla, T 54201, 1971.



Picket lines and picket signs  
 Don't punish me with brutality  
 Talk to me, so you can see  
 What's going on<sup>40</sup>

Musically, "What's Going On" had many of the characteristics of funk modernism. The Funk Brothers created a smooth jazz groove with a traveling bass line and saxophone chords that created a wall of sound. The opening saxophone solo cuts through the texture but the atmosphere still remains meditative and calm. To help create this atmosphere Gaye layered scat voices against his falsetto runs. His voice is silky and smooth as a result he is able to give the listener a meditative experience. Gaye borrowed many of the sounds and harmonies from jazz. The harmonies were more sophisticated because he added sevenths, ninths, and thirteenths, which added harmonic tension to the quality of the chord. These harmonies are upper extensions of the more basic seventh chord and are harmonically more complex. Also, the music was continuous without clear cut phrase endings.

As the Vietnam War was an inspiration for "What's Going On", it was also an inspiration for "War!" by Edwin Starr. Originally written for the Temptations, Gordy decided that the song's message would tarnish the Temptations image, so he gave the song to Edwin Starr, an artist not as well known. The transfer of the song to Starr ended up being a good thing for him because the song instantly became a number one record. This song is declamatory in its message that war is a tragedy for all people. The song

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



begins with a snare drum roll as a build up to the first chorus. When Starr sings the word "war", it is accompanied by full, heavy, staccato brass chords. These chords add to the declamatory atmosphere. The verses are accompanied by thicker textures that include layers of percussion, brass, and electric guitars. Syncopation is used throughout which is unlike the Motown songs that came before. It was used heavily in jazz and other genres. This is an example of the musical fusion associated with "funk modernism." Starr's aggressive vocals, which include shouts and runs add to the intensity of the song. The vocal and instrumental techniques draw upon key musical characteristics from earlier genres such as gospel and blues.

In the lyrics, like "What's Going On", he mentions mothers crying because their sons are going off to war and end up losing their lives. The lyrics below are presented to show the declamatory statement of the song and the emotionality of the music during this time period.

War  
What is it good for?  
Absolutely nothing

War  
What is it good for?  
Absolutely nothing, say it again y'all

War, good God  
What is it good for?  
Absolutely nothing, listen to me

Oh, war, I despise  
'Cause it means destruction of innocent lives



War means tears to thousands of mothers eyes  
When their sons go off to fight and lose their lives<sup>41</sup>

Although tensions were high in the military due to the Vietnam War and the integration of troops, Motown soared musically. Motown produced its first television special, *Taking Care of Business* (TCB). TCB was a television special that premiered in 1968, showing Motown's two most popular groups, The Temptations and Diana Ross and the Supremes. It was so popular that it became the top rated variety show of 1968. It was a defining moment for Motown because it surpassed everyone's expectations of Motown, and it received an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Individual Achievement in Electronic Production.<sup>42</sup> The success of this television show and Motown's music showed that the American culture was evolving.

All of these changes and successes over time allowed Motown to thrive during some of the most challenging times in history, such as the Civil Rights Movement and Bloody Thursday. Motown helped bridge the gap between two different communities through music. The social and political issues of the 1960s and 70s allowed the music to become a voice for the people. The artists and songwriters were able to capture their audiences with memorable lyrics, beautiful melodies, and a strong sense of rhythmic pulse. When Motown began to crossover to white audiences, the racial barriers started to come down, and the music brought awareness to the social injustices of America, particularly the South. Motown challenged the social norms of American culture and

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<sup>41</sup>Edwin Starr, Norman Whitfield and Barrett Strong, *War!*, Lyrics, Gordy, G 7101, 1970.

<sup>42</sup> Morse, 78-83.



allowed its music to influence all people and without these changes our society may not have progressed the way it did. The cultural and political barriers allowed Motown's music to flourish. From 1959 to 1972, Motown's music evolved from being solely for entertainment to music with political and social messages. Motown opened many doors for African-American musicians, writers, and artists while championing a proud tradition of hard work, creativity, and social progression.

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